

GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

ARCHIVE PROJECT

LYGIA PAPE: Exploring the Body in Public Space

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Lygia Pape, *Divisor* ("Divider"), Photograph of performance, 1968. Image from Hyperallergic.

Lygia Pape is a Brazilian artist known for her work with the Concrete art movement and credited as a key founder of the Neoconcrete art movement in 20th century Brazil. Her practice was formative in exploring contemporary art in Brazil and engaging geometric art around themes of politics and the body. As a Neoconcrete artist, Pape expanded this abstraction of geometric shape in relation to public spheres and body sensations. For this paper, Pape's *Divisor* and *Teteia* will be analyzed through the frameworks presented in Judith Butler's *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street*. While both of these pieces originated before Judith Butler's piece, this recognition of the senses in the public sphere, exploration of body, and relationship between participant/observer are all frameworks both are exploring in their own respects.

Pape was born April 7, 1929 in Nova Friburgo, Brazil, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro. She studied at the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro that led to her introduction of the Concrete art movement.¹ Concrete art is based in geometric abstraction and is free of any symbolic meaning. Concrete art is a practice "free of any basis in observed reality" meaning that this style was primarily focused on abstract and studying the visual form rather than perceptions of it.² The Concrete art movement formed two Brazilian Concrete art groups that embraced this style, the Ruptura based in Sao Paulo and the Grupo Frente in Rio de Janeiro. Pape joined the Grupo Frente with her colleagues Lygia Clark, Helio Oiticica, and Aluísio Carvão, all working under Ivan Serpa, who formed the group in 1952. The Grupo Frente is credited as founding the Neoconcrete art movement. Neoconcrete art is a more phenomenological approach and interested in the sensations created by Concrete art.³ Their approach was more based on sensuality, colour, and poetic feeling rather than the pure aesthetics of Concrete art. The Grupo Frente did not

¹ Meghreblian, "Pape, Lygia (1929–2004)," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture*.

² Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*.

³ Martins, "Phenomenological Openness: Historicist Closure: Revisiting the Theory of the Non-Object."

necessarily reject concreticism, more so they expanded this practice into three-dimensional spaces and dealt with the ways in which the body responds to works. Pape's works are exceptional in Neoconcrete art as her practice often deals with the relationship between the participant and the observer.

After breaking off from the Grupo Frente, Pape's practice started to grow larger with installations and videos. During the 1960s and 1970s, her works became more political against the military dictatorship in Brazil. During this period, she taught semiotics at the School of Architecture at the Universidade Santa Úrsula in Rio de Janeiro. She is remembered for being at odds with Academia and challenging the education system.⁴ It is recalled that she encouraged her students to engage with space creatively and push boundaries which is very characteristic of her as a Neoconcrete artist.

While teaching in the 1970s, she began experimenting with her students using threads in nature to develop an architectural form.⁵ It was through this exploration of materials that would inspire her to create her *Ttéia* installations. Pape's *Ttéia* installations are significant in highlighting her transition from Concrete art to Neo-concrete. During her practice as a Concrete artist, she was interested in the woodcuts in her *Tecelares* series. These woodcuttings were classic of Concrete art as they were geometric in design and straightforward in their aesthetics. The series abstracts form and emphasizes line quality and texture. Pape revisits this appreciation for the weaving and wefting of line in her *Ttéia* installations. These installations consist of gold or silver threads extended from the ceiling to the floor intersecting in these geometric patterns. Lights are directed on the threads to play out this space and prompt participants to engage with the space. The title comes from a combination of two Portuguese words "teia" for web and

⁴ Almino, "Channeling Lygia Pape's Radical Relationship to Space."

⁵ Alvarez, "Neoconcretism and the Making of Brazilian National Culture, 1954–1961".

“teteia” which is a colloquial expression for a graceful and delicate person or thing.⁶ Pape exaggerated this sense of elegance in this installation by immersing the viewer in this room. Neoconcrete art sought to create an experience of the senses while simultaneously abstracting geometric forms. The *Ttéia* installations are significant of Pape’s practice because they highlight how Neoconcrete did not reject Concrete but an expansion.

The awareness of space and appreciation for senses has been analyzed by American philosopher Judith Butler in *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street*. While Butler approaches this through considering bodies in protest and collecting in the streets, Butler spends time recognizing how the space interacts with the senses. The *Ttéia* installations liberate a space and engulf the viewer through the senses. “The body, defined politically, is precisely organized by a perspective that is not one’s own and is, in that sense, already elsewhere, for another, and so in departure from oneself.”⁷ Butler considers the appearance of self and space, and she notes that space is not all inclusive of everywhere. Here the space being discussed is the gallery space, and the participation in the space lends itself to the departure of self. It is as if for the time in the gallery space, the viewer is literally inside one of Pape’s pieces. The viewer becomes a part of the installation, so they lose that selfness. It is a political in a sense of surrendering self to a space, allowing the space to fill the senses. The *Ttéia* installations offer a space for the viewer to immerse themselves in these abstract forms.

Pape’s *Divisor* (1968) features Neo-concretism with the body, space, and exploration of gesture. *Divisor* is a large white sheet of fabric with slits cut for individuals to poke their bodies out of. It was intended for a gallery space in which hot air would be used to further the “dividing” experience in the space. Unfortunately, the piece did not get approved for museum

⁶ Fer, “Lygia Pape: Magnetized Space.”

⁷ Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street.”

space for protocols and limitations with controlling the space -which is quite ironic considering that Pape was attempting to critique space in this piece. However, Pape did not hesitate to take this piece to the streets where it took on an even stronger meaning than it did in the gallery space. In the streets, Pape would have participants walk as a unit each poking out of the sheet. Individuals would rely on each other to move as a unit and trust that they would look out for each other. The people on the outskirts of the piece would have more visibility whereas those on the inside were reliant on the movement of the group to keep going. Pape first attempted this during the military dictatorship, which gave people the opportunity to engage in public protest by moving as a mass unit during a period of street surveillance. While there is a huge relationship between participants as they are reliant on each other and building a sense of group identity, there is a role that the observer plays.⁸ Considering the context of this piece, Pape was aware of the repercussions her piece would have on the military and response to the dictatorship. The piece acts as a physical representation of the divide between those rejecting the dictatorship and the military. It presents the participants as one unit working together against this observer, the military. Pape commented that in creating this piece she wanted this piece to be a collective piece that could be reenacted even when she was not present.⁹ Divisor has since been used globally as a means to explore protest and bring forth engagement with the arts and community. In 2017, the MET replicated Divisor as a part of the exhibit they hosted to celebrate the achievements of Pape.¹⁰

Judith Butler presents this framework that politics has surpassed government and business in a way that now “politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the

⁸ Mueso Nacional Centro de Arte, “Divisor. A Lygia Pape performance.”

⁹ Pape, Lygia, Iria Candela, Glória Ferreira, Sérgio B. Martins, and John Rajchman, *Lygia Pape : a Multitude of Forms*.

¹⁰Almino, “Channeling Lygia Pape’s Radical Relationship to Space.”

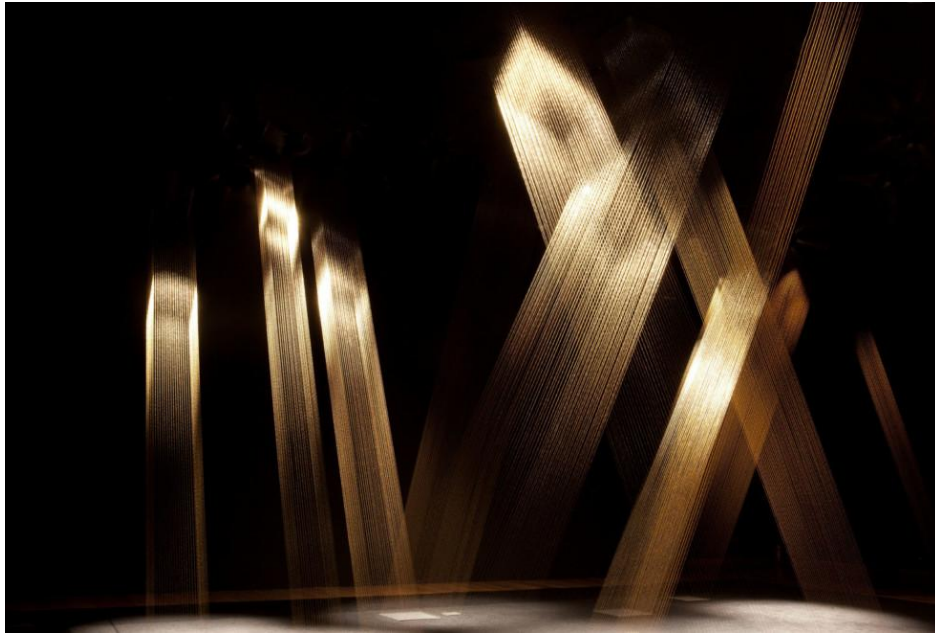
neighborhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square.”¹¹ Pape was already drawing upon this ideology in *Divisor*. In taking this performance to the streets, Pape is breaking out of what is public space. While it remains political in a sense, Pape is building an even stronger argument towards communal effort in this piece. Butler explores how bodies in crowds can work as a unit while remaining individualism. In *Divisor*, the participants are positioned to move singularly and made hyper-aware of their role in moving with the group. Butler draws attention to the body as individuals can become part of this “togetherness” through public demonstrations.¹² It is this phenomena of feeling the divide between yourself and the group that both are tackling. *Divisor* is a performance that exhibits this sense of body navigating public space through a heightened experience.

Pape’s practice was formative in defining the framework of Neoconcrete art. Her practice reconsidered geometric form and line through the body and senses to create these out of body experiences in public spaces. Her works align with the theories presented by Butler and further expand on this relationship between public spheres and phenomenology. Pape’s works stand as a reminder that the artist, the participant, and the observer each play a significant role in understanding and appreciating Neoconcrete artworks.

¹¹ Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street.”

¹² Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street.”

Artworks



Lygia Pape, *Ttéia 1, C*, Installation, 2003/2012. (Image from Projeto Lygia Pape and Hauser & Wirth.)



Lygia Pape, *Divisor* ("Divider"), Photograph of performance, 1968. (Image from Hyperallergic.)

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